

The Greater Claim

A Story of The Far West

The door of Miss Mandy's hotel was slammed shut with a bang against the fierce onslaughts of an icy blast that raged up and down the little canyon like some mad thing.

A Montana blizzard was in progress and the trip over the divide had been a wild one. Theophilus Willard was the only passenger in the caboose, and the exigencies of the occasion, together with the frank unceremoniousness that characterizes the average Westerner, soon involved passenger and crew in relations more or less familiar, in which a common interest in a stopping place for the night played a conspicuous part.

Strangers were neither so common nor uncommon at Miss Mandy's as to interfere with the attitude of good-fellowship that prevailed among her boarders. The through passenger trains rarely stopped at Wolf Creek, but freight trains changed crews at that point, and it followed that Miss Mandy's patrons were confined to those few whose occupation made them frequenters of the town.

"Come in and have your fortune told, Miss Mandy," called Billy King, when the meal was over, the table cleared, and chairs were drawn up before the fire.

"Nonsense!" said a voice from the kitchen, where the clatter of dishes spoke for itself.

"Aw! Come on, Miss Mandy," urged Legs, "this fellow'll tell you anything you want to know, from when you were born to who your fate's goin' to be."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Miss Mandy, "either one's soubin—I wouldn't want told in public."

"Well, then, he'll tell you you're goin' to be a rich widdo' and when you're goin' to see the man," interposed Billy.

"Now, Miss Mandy! Don't be too hard on us. But come and let his nob, here, see how many lies he c'n tell."

"Oh, well! For the sake of a little amusement, maybe, when I'm done with the dishes," she disappeared again. If anyone had hinted to Miss Mandy that she was superstitious, she would have denied the implication with spirit.

"Now, Miss Mandy! Don't be too hard on us. But come and let his nob, here, see how many lies he c'n tell."

"With the exception of a few unimportant details," continued the palmist, "that is—about all I see concerning your past and your character. Now we'll find what the future has for you."

"You can't come any half-way tactics with Miss Mandy," remarked Bob Wells, who had straddled a chair with the back in front of him, while Legs lay flat on the floor before the fireplace.

"If I just tell her about her character, it's bound to be a good one," said the palmist, gallantly, as he looked into the upturned palm.

"There ain't no use of your tellin' me my character," interposed Miss

Mandy, "I know that 'bout's well 's it can be known. What I want t' know is what's in store for me."

"All right, but I must tell you a little about what you know to be true, or you won't believe me." Theophilus manner could be very smooth upon occasions. Just now he seemed to be musing over what he saw in Miss Mandy's palm.

"How do you know?" asked Miss Mandy.

"The palm is an open book," the scientific palmist replied. "That dialect don't often deceive me," he thought. "You came West some time ago."

"Yes, with father," vouchsafed Miss Mandy.

"Don't tell me anything," said Theophilus, deprecatingly. "I must do this alone. You've been West perhaps—twenty years." Theophilus had seen something of the world, and was from necessity, a good judge of character.

"You have never been home since you came, though you have relatives still in your native town—near relatives."

"Your father has been dead about two years, I would say. He was some-where near eighty years old."

"Does he guess all this?" she asked herself. "At the mention of the love affair, the blood pulsed in her faded cheek for a moment, but was gone again by the time she recovered enough to laugh sceptically. But the crew of '54' saw it and were touched. She was so little and so alone."

"Your fate line is somewhat uneven. Let me see your other hand, please! Hm! Still more broken. You began your existence in fairly favorable surroundings and had you remained in your birthplace your life would have been comparatively easy."

"Well, my life has taught me one thing," responded Miss Mandy. "I've 'em all in all, most quadruped. I've seen have a heap more trust-worthy than lots o' bipeds I've encountered."

"What's getting into you, anyway, Mandy Hodge? Gather together your scattered old senses and go to bed. I'm ashamed of ye." And she locked the door, took up the lamp and went to her room.

The next morning, after the crew of '54' had gone east on its run and Theophilus had taken a west-bound freight, Miss Mandy stood in her front door and surveyed the scene before and around her.

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the palmist, slowly and impressively. Again there was silence—a silence that seemed interminable, while the reader continued to study intently.

When several moments had elapsed and no word was spoken, Miss Mandy moved a little in her chair. She was growing a trifle nervous.

"I find an unusual combination here," he said. "The late line, after running smoothly for perhaps an inch, suddenly shoots into the life line."

"You are about forty-nine years of age," he volunteered, at last.

"These lines—end—at the point—which represent—your fiftieth birthday." The Delphic oracle could not have spoken more ominously. Miss Mandy began to understand.

"I see also the sign of a quadruped—evidently significant when near the indication of an accident, as in this case."

"On my fiftieth birthday," mused Miss Mandy. There was another eloquently down the chimney, and added to the intensity of the moment—an intensity that was its own undoing, for Miss Mandy, growing unconscious of it all at once, seemed to recover herself. "Well," she said philosophically, as she rose, "my time's got to come some day, so it may's well come then," and she laughed a little.

The spell was broken. Billy King's chair came to the floor with a thump, and as he walked to the stairway, he observed in a tone that was not altogether amiable, that the palmist would never suffer for lack of imagination. Legs got slowly to his feet and shuffled towards the door, but as he passed Bob Wells he remarked succinctly, "That fellow's a damn fool to tell her all that rot."

The palmist rose with the others. He seemed to realize that he had said too much, but it would not do to go back on his reading. So he attempted to conciliate matters a little by saying jocularly, "There's a chance that I was mistaken on that last, Miss Mandy. If I had a magnifying glass to see the smaller lines with I could tell you better. Sorry I left mine in Helena. But I'd advise you to look out for quadrupeds, all the same, on your fiftieth birthday."

"Well, my life has taught me one thing," responded Miss Mandy. "I've 'em all in all, most quadruped. I've seen have a heap more trust-worthy than lots o' bipeds I've encountered."

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off by green trimmings, the trademark of the company. This was Wolf Creek, Montana, thirty-five miles west of the Rocky Mountain tunnel, on the Northern Pacific Railroad.

Miss Mandy stood there surveying it with eyes that seemed suddenly open to things she had never seen before. How pitifully small, how desperately monotonous it was, this little way station on the road to Somewhere, dignified only by the tin-test of dots on the official time-tables.

Passenger trains fled past it with a shriek, as if the mere suggestion of a stop there was maddening. The only glimpse Miss Mandy had of the world was that afforded by the tired, listless faces in the windows as the express swung into view and was gone in a whirl of snow. But she thought of those faces all day, till they became her friends, and she imagined she knew the story of every one.

Her eyes wandered to the mountains around and above her, their sides covered with needle-pointed pines outlined sharply against the background of snow, with here and there bare, jagged rocks jutting out boldly in relief from the sinuous slopes. She looked long and lovingly at them, and drew a slow, deep breath. "Ah! but they are magnificent!" she thought.

Then she gazed eastward beyond where the track narrowed to a point and was lost in a bend; father and farther beyond, where the craggy, snow-capped peaks of a divide rose majestically into the incomparable blue of a Montana sky. Something of their grandeur and immensity seemed to envelope her, and made her suddenly conscious of her own insignificance. She became all at once aware of an overpowering sense of helplessness, of an impulse to seek protection from someone, and with the realization of her impotence came a flood of loneliness that she had never experienced before.

She thought of what lay beyond those peaks—the desolate, undulating plains of eastern Montana and Dakota, on through the weird horrors of the Bad Lands to the Middle West, with its immense fields of waving grain; then the thickly settled East, with its great cities, and finally, New England, her New England, and its rolling green hills, its woods, its spacious old farm-houses and picturesque meadows! Twenty-five years was a long time to have stayed away from it.

Her fiftieth birthday—a journey—to Ellen and the children—why not? An accident! Her fiftieth birthday! The thoughts came crowding and jostling one another, and in sudden bewilderment she sat down on the door-step to think a little more clearly.

Suppose it should come true, what the palmist had said. Suppose she should die, on her fiftieth birthday. She pictured to herself what it would be like here. Bob Wells and Billy King and Legs would be there, of course, and the engineer's wife would take charge of things. The two or three other women whose lot had been cast at Wolf Creek along with her husband's would come and do what they could. And that would be all. There would be a little procession and another mound over there at the foot of the mountain among the pines. Yes, she'd like to rest over there—it weren't so lonely. Even her father was not there for she had sent him home. Home! The tears welled to Miss Mandy's eyes.

There was no real reason why she never had gone. She had lingered because she had come to love this great, boundless, big-hearted West—because there had never seemed any plausible reason why she should go. She called herself a Westerner now, she had been a part of it for so long, and experienced so much.

As she sat there, every detail of her life came before her vividly. She saw herself as a girl on the farm in Massachusetts until her sister's marriage and her mother's death left her in charge of everything and changed her in a year to a woman whose last thought was of herself. Then came her father's determination to come West, and she could not let him go alone, she who was all he had left. And finally, there had been the heart-breaking good-bye to him. Now there spread before her imagination a panorama of events—the long journey across the continent; the rush to the mines, from Utah to Colorado, to Colorado to Wyoming and Montana, now here, now there; the Indian wars, when she had been huddled in a building for days, together with women and children, waiting with bated breath for the terror to come, while the men stood guard without. And afterward there was more drifting. From Virginia City they had gone to Helena, at that time Last Chance Gulch, and thence to Butte, winning and losing, enjoying and suffering. At length when the fever had burned out to some degree and her father had become too old to wander any more, they had somehow settled down here at Wolf Creek, where she had kept the hotel and earned a living for the two of them. Two years before she had closed her father's eyes—and yet she stayed on. Ellen had always seemed so far away. And now in six months it would be her fiftieth birthday.

Of a sudden she stood up, and looking at the pine-covered sides of the great mound opposite, she spoke as if in defiance of it.

"I will! I go! And if I'm killed on my fiftieth birthday, I'll at least be at home." There was a relief in expressing it in words.

She almost expected a denunciation to be hurled back at her from the

mountain, for she stood there some moments, staring at it. Then drying her eyes hurriedly on her gingham apron, she went into the house.

For six months Miss Mandy made and executed plans with scrupulous regard to details. She consulted time tables and decided to leave Wolf Creek five days before her birthday, so that her arrival home would come upon that date. She would go in the day coach and take a supply of eatables in a basket. She would mend up her old, but best, dress, and send to Butte for some nice cashmere to make a new one. She would fix herself a neat little bonnet out of some old velvet she had, and make a few other little necessities. And as she sat sewing she grew into the habit of picturing the whole scene as it would occur when she reached Fernside. John would meet her at the station with the buckboard and they would drive out to the farm. The thought sent a little thrill of fear through her. A buckboard presupposed a horse, a horse was a quadruped, and the palmist had said—but nonsense! Why should she pay so much attention to what the palmist had said? If her time was to come then it would come, and that's all there was to it. Besides, John's meeting her with the buckboard would give her the chance to prove the truth or fallacy of the palmist's words. The desire to satisfy her curiosity was almost as potent a factor in forming her decisions as was her anxiety to be home. So from a little superstitious feeling of dread, her attitude changed to one of eagerness and she looked forward to the arrival with less fear than joy.

Billy King thought Miss Mandy seemed preoccupied, or absent-minded, or something. He didn't know just what it was, but he felt a difference. Bob said he believed she was worrying over that fool fortune-teller's nonsense. But Legs remarked that he'd seen her smile to herself once, so he guessed she didn't feel very much cut up. It was not till Miss Mandy told them of the intended visit, a week before the time of her departure, that they understood.

She could not tell them before. It was her own little secret that she guarded almost jealously. She wanted to think about it and nurse it and plan for it without any rude interference, however well meant it might be. She was too selfish to share it with even her best friends—too wise, perhaps. But at length she felt they ought to know it, now that the time was so near, she owed it to them, and when she told her plan, with her little wrinkled face almost youthful in its eager anticipation, she expected something different from her listeners than the silence that fell upon them. She looked from one to the other for a word of approval or encouragement, but none came. Bob Wells gazed intently at the toe of his shoe. Billy King and Legs would be there, of course, and the engineer's wife would take charge of things. The two or three other women whose lot had been cast at Wolf Creek along with her husband's would come and do what they could. And that would be all. There would be a little procession and another mound over there at the foot of the mountain among the pines. Yes, she'd like to rest over there—it weren't so lonely. Even her father was not there for she had sent him home. Home! The tears welled to Miss Mandy's eyes.

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